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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 70, No. 4, Whole No. 407, OCT., 1977. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at \$1.00 a copy. Annual subscription \$14.00 in U.S.A., \$15.20 in U.S. possessions and Canada; \$16.40 in the Pan American Union and in all other countries. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 229 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10003. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, Ct. 06830. Second-class postage paid at N.Y., N.Y., and additional mailing offices. © 1977 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope, the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

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a NEW detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

Another case from the casebook of Henry Turnbuckle, private investigator . . . It started like an old chestnut—a case of amnesia—but it ended like a fresh walnut, full of new wrinkles . . .

THE WILLINGER PREDICAMENT

by JACK RITCHIE

My client leaned forward. "I would like to know who I am."

I nodded understandingly. "Amnesia?"

"Exactly."

"I assume you have consulted your wallet, sir? Do you have a driver's license or perhaps a library card?"

He was in his mid-thirties, of slight build, and wearing shell glasses. "I have a driver's license and the usual number of credit cards, not to mention my social security number, but they tell me only who I am *now*. Not who I *was*."

"How long have you had this amnesia, sir?"

"Slightly more than six years."

I pondered that. "And now—after six years—you at last want to find out who you are? Or were? Haven't you had any curiosity about that before?"

"Oh, yes. Plenty of curiosity. However I did not think it was prudent to press the matter."

I waited for his explanation.

"On a warm evening six years ago," he said, "I found myself sitting beside a bush in a small-town park up north with a dreadful headache and also the realization that I simply did not know who I was. It was really quite frightening."

I sympathized. "I should imagine. But at that time did you not check your pockets for a wallet or other identification?"

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"My very first action. But my pockets contained no wallet. I had absolutely no identification on my person."

"You mentioned that it was a small town? In small towns people go about recognizing one another. Couldn't you have asked someone who you were?"

"I thought of that. But it did seem a bit too embarrassing to resort to as a first measure. No, I had something else to go on and I decided to try that first."

"And the something else was?"

"A key. Except for that—and a handkerchief and a comb—my pockets were empty. The fiberboard tag attached to the key was numbered and the lettering indicated that it belonged to a locker in the town's bus station."

"Naturally you went to the bus-station locker?"

"Naturally. And I found a briefcase inside the locker. It contained two hundred thousand dollars. All of it in one-hundred-dollar bills."

I nodded thoughtfully. "On your way to this bus station you must have encountered people? Were there any nods, hellos, or that sort of thing?"

"There were absolutely no signs of recognition from anyone. From which I gathered that I was a stranger in town."

I adopted the same conclusion. "Since you had no car keys on your person, one would guess that you probably had arrived in town by bus. You deposited a briefcase in the locker and pocketed the key. You then left the station and for some reason went to this park. There, it would seem, you were mugged. Struck on the head and relieved of your wallet. Something rather rare to occur in a small town, but nevertheless possible. And when you regained consciousness, you fond that you had amnesia. Were the bills old or new?"

"They appeared to have been in circulation before."

"What were you wearing?"

"A rather cheap suit, and one of my shoes needed resoling. Otherwise I was clean-shaven and fairly well-groomed."

"Ah, yes," I said. "And what came to your mind as you gazed on all that money?"

"It seemed fairly obvious to me that I was not the type of person who made a habit of carrying two hundred thousand dollars about in a briefcase. The thought immediately crossed my mind that I was either an embezzler or had just robbed a bank."

"I gather you did not consider taking the matter to the police?"

"Certainly not. I did not relish being clapped into jail if I were guilty of either crime." He sighed. "But even if I possessed the money innocently, I knew instinctively that I had never handled so much of it before in my life and that it was highly unlikely that I ever would again. In short, I yielded to the temptation. I left town with the briefcase and its contents and I did not stop until I reached the West Coast two days later."

He smiled faintly. "Yes, the last six years have been remarkably good to me. I worked hard. I prospered. Today I am a relatively wealthy man."

"And so now you return to the mid-west to find out who you really were and possibly to make restitution to whoever really owns the two hundred thousand dollars?"

"Exactly. However by no means do I necessarily wish to resume my old identity, whatever that was. I am quite content to be who I am today. I am merely curious about the past." Then he frowned slightly. "And yet there is something else which seems to disturb me at times. Besides taking the money. But for the life of me I cannot put my finger on what it is."

"Do you remember the date and the town in which you acquired your amnesia?"

"Blue River Falls. On June 17, 1971. It is a small town some two hundred miles to the north of here."

"How did you leave Blue River Falls? By bus?"

"No. I discovered there would be no bus leaving until the next day and I did not want to wait that long. I walked to the town's railway depot and just managed to catch the one and only train stopping at Blue River Falls. It took me to Chicago and from there I transferred to another train west."

"Your name, sir?" I asked. "The one which you use now."

"It will not be necessary for you to know who I am. I will keep in touch with you."

"Do you have a photograph or a snapshot I could use?"

"You will have to do without one. I do not want you flashing my likeness to anyone, especially since I am possibly a fugitive from the law. This must be kept strictly confidential. Simply find out who I was and what I did to get the money."

He took out his wallet and began counting out my retainer. One of the bills drifted to the floor and he bent down to retrieve it. When he rose, he bumped his head on the edge of my desk.

He swore and caressed the injured portion of his skull.

I waited hopefully and then asked, "By any chance did that bump restore—"

He shook his head. "No. I've bumped my head dozens of times in the last six years and I don't think a bump will restore my memory. On the other hand, perhaps some emotional shock, revelation, or trauma might just do the job."

Early the next morning I drove my car north, arriving in Blue River Falls at ten A.M. I found that the bus-station ticket office occupied a small section of a drugstore on Main Street. It also contained a bench for waiting passengers and a dozen metal lockers against one wall.

I approached the counter. "Do you have a bus schedule?"

I was handed a single card and I discovered that the Northern Bus Line was the only line to serve the area. In the morning the run began at Clayton and ended at Regansville. In the evening the route was retraced from Regansville back to Clayton.

I decided to work on the assumption that my client had been on the evening bus to arrive here. In that case the only town on the line he could have come from would be Regansville, since Blue River Falls was its second stop on the evening run.

I returned to my car and drove twelve miles to Regansville. I parked my car and wandered about, past the offices of the weekly *Regansville Gazette*, until I found the public library.

At the desk I inquired about the periodical room.

The librarian, a dark-haired young woman of perhaps 30, directed me downstairs to the basement where I found a nicely lighted room containing a half dozen elderly citizens at a table reading current newspapers and magazines.

I searched the wide shelves in the rear of the room until I found the back issues of the *Regansville Gazette*. I selected the large bound volume covering the year 1971 and brought it back to the table.

I leafed through the pages, finding nothing of immediate concern until I reached the week of June 21.

Yes, by George, it was all there. On the front page of the *Regansville Gazette*. Pictures—including one of my client. And at that time his name had been Arnold Willinger.

It seemed that on June 15, James Dougherty, twelve-year-old son of Cletus Dougherty, president and owner of the Dougherty Shoe Factory in Regansville, had failed to show up for supper.

Instead, his father had received a phone call and been informed by a man's voice that his son had been kidnaped and that the kidnappers wanted \$200,000 for the safe return of the boy.

Dougherty was also warned that if he went to the police he would never see his son alive again. The ransom—all of which was to be in \$100 bills—was to be put into a briefcase and taken to the Blue River Falls bus station where it was to be deposited in one of the lockers. They key to the locker was then to be left in a crack at the base of an equestrian statue in the Blue River Falls park.

Dougherty gathered the money, put it into the briefcase, and sent it off with one of his bookkeepers—one Arnold Willinger.

And that was the last anyone saw of the money—or of Arnold Willinger.

At eleven that evening Dougherty had received another call from the kidnappers demanding to know why the ransom money had not been delivered.

Dougherty had protested that someone had been sent out but that something must have gone wrong. However, he promised the kidnappers that he would immediately raise another \$200,000 and this time act as the messenger himself.

While the negotiations had been going on, the Dougherty boy had been kept confined to a log cabin in the woods near Regansville. And during the early morning hours of the next day the boy—evidently a cool resourceful fellow—managed to free himself from his bonds while his abductors were asleep. The boy had sneaked quietly out of the cabin, made his way through the woods to a road, and flagged down a car. An hour later he led the sheriff and his deputies back to the cabin where they woke the kidnappers—strangers in the area—and arrested them.

I read the account over again and then went back upstairs to ask the librarian for directions to the Dougherty Shoe Factory. I drove to the site, a large three-story structure occupying half of a town block.

In the office section of the building I made further inquiries and eventually found myself talking to a Miss Henson, Dougherty's private secretary.

She was a rather striking woman, well-endowed, and with blue-green eyes. She asked why I wanted to see Mr. Dougherty.

I smiled mysteriously and told her that it was a confidential matter for his ears alone.

She regarded me dubiously, then shrugged and entered Dougherty's office.

While I waited for her return, my attention was drawn to a framed photograph on Miss Henson's desk. It depicted a women's bowling team, the central figure of which, Miss Henson, clutched a trophy of some sort.

Miss Henson returned from the inner office. "Mr. Dougherty will see you."

Dougherty, a large man in his fifties, offered me a seat and waited.

"My name is Turnbuckle," I said. "Henry Turnbuckle. I am a private investigator."

He was not impressed. "So?"

"Mr. Dougherty, some six years ago, your son was kidnaped."

He nodded cautiously. "That's right."

"The kidnaper demanded two hundred thousand dollars. You raised the money and dispatched it off with one Arnold Willinger. He was to deposit it in a bus-station locker in Blue River Falls."

Dougherty's face reddened with the memory of it. "Arnold disappeared and so did my money."

"Mr. Dougherty," I said, "I am in a position to see to it that the two hundred thousand dollars is returned to you."

He quickly sat up. "If you know where Arnold is, you'd better turn him over to the police."

"I honestly do not know where he is at this moment. However, he has contacted me and offered to return the money he took from you. If I made an effort to trap him for the police and the effort failed, he would undoubtedly simply disappear again and you would still be out the two hundred thousand dollars." I shook my head. "I think you should settle for the money and leave Arnold alone."

Dougherty gave it some thought and then shrugged. "I'll be satisfied with the money."

I nodded. "And you shall have it. However, if I may, I would like to ask you a few questions. When you were informed that your son had been kidnaped, you were also, I understand, cautioned not to go to the police?"

"And I didn't. They weren't in on any of it until after my son escaped."

"When you sent Arnold to Blue River Falls, did he know that your son had been kidnaped?"

"No. My wife and I kept that to ourselves."

"Did Arnold know that there was two hundred thousand dollars in the briefcase?"

"No. I just gave him the instructions for the delivery. Maybe he thought the whole errand a little strange, but he didn't ask any questions."

"Why did you select Arnold to deliver the money?"

"Actually I wanted to deliver the money myself, but my wife talked me out of it. She was afraid I might lose my cool and do something to mess things up. She thought it would be better if we sent someone neutral, someone who wasn't emotionally involved. Arnold was just the nearest person available, so to speak."

"Did you perhaps have the foresight to at least make a list of the serial numbers of the ransom bills?"

"I did. Took down every one of the numbers myself and handed the list over to the police later." He rose and went to a filing cabinet. After a few moments of search he pulled out a sheaf of onion-skin paper. "Here they are."

I paged through the carbon copies. "Was any of the money ever recovered?"

"Not one cent. I suppose Arnold was able to fence it, or whatever people do to get rid of hot money."

Personally I doubted that Arnold would have that knowledge. "You said you 'took down' the numbers. Do you mean you typed this list?"

"No. I wrote them with a pen, then gave the list to my secretary, and she typed them for the police. That's one of the copies."

"Your secretary? Miss Henson?"

"Yes."

I handed the sheaf back to Dougherty, assured him that he would have his money returned soon, and said goodbye.

When I left his office, I saw that Miss Henson seemed to be off on an errand of some kind.

I waited for a while, but when she did not return I slipped the framed bowling photo into my pocket and departed.

I drove back down to the city and stopped at a photographer's shop near my office. I asked that an enlargement be made of Miss Henson alone.

I had that enlargement in my desk drawer when Arnold Willinger reappeared in my office at the end of the week. This time he carried a briefcase. "Have you found out who I am?"

I nodded. "It all began with the kidnaping of the Dougherty boy."

He blinked.

I went on, "On June 15, 1971 the son of Cletus Dougherty, president of the Dougherty Shoe Company of Regansville, was kidnaped. His abductors demanded two hundred thousand dollars in ransom. Dougherty collected the money, put it into a briefcase, and gave it to you to deliver to a bus-station locker in Blue River Falls, from which point the kidnapers would pick it up."

He had paled. "It was ransom money?"

"Yes. You deposited the briefcase as instructed and were in the process of delivering the locker key as instructed when you were set upon by a mugger and relieved of your wallet and memory."

Arnold dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. "And the Dougherty boy? What happened to him?"

"He managed to escape from the cabin in which he was being held while his kidnapers were asleep. He made his way to the sheriff, who returned to the cabin with his deputies and apprehended the kidnapers." I smiled. "Your name is Arnold Willinger. You were a resident of Regansville and an employee of Dougherty's."

He sat there for a while rubbing his jaw. "Arnold Willinger? Arnold Willinger? It *does* seem to have a familiar ring. And I seem to see the vague outlines of a shoe factory."

"Excellent," I said. I removed the enlargement of Miss Henson from my desk drawer and flashed it suddenly before his eyes. "And who is she?"

Arnold stared at me for a moment and then back at the picture. "Ah, yes. It is slowly, slowly coming back to me. Benson, Jenson, Renson. No. *Henson*. But of course. I do believe that is Miss Henson."

I smiled triumphantly. "I knew that if anything in this world could jar you out of your amnesia, this photograph would do it."

He looked at me again. "Why did you think this photograph would do it?"

I folded my arms. "Because, my dear sir, when Dougherty collected the ransom money, he listed the serial numbers of every one of the bills. He then handed the list to Miss Henson so that she might make a typewritten copy for the police. And yet, throughout all these years, not a single bill of that ransom money has ever been recovered. Do you know why?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but I held up a hand. "Because when Miss Henson typed that list, she changed one or two of the digits in each number."

Willinger frowned. "Why would she do that?"

"She did it so that when the bills were put into circulation, they would not lead to your arrest." I smiled again. "As your memory continues to return, you will remember that the relationship between you and Miss Henson was not exactly that of stranger to stranger." I chuckled. "How is your memory getting along now?"

"Just fine," he said. "Everything is swimming back. Except I don't see why Miss Henson should have altered those serial numbers. We were barely on nodding terms. To put it plainly, there was absolutely nothing whatsoever between us or likely to be. Did she say that she changed the numbers?"

"Well, no," I admitted a bit reluctantly. "However, I arrived at that conclusion through sheer deduction and irrefutable logic. How else could it be explained that not a single one of the ransom bills ever turned up in circulation?"

"That's easy," Arnold said. He patted the briefcase. "Because I never spent so much as a single bill of the ransom money."

My office was silent for at least fifteen seconds.

Arnold nodded. "That's right. Not one red cent. When I took the money to the West Coast, I really intended to go on a spending binge, but somehow I just couldn't bring myself to do it." He smiled. "On the very first day I got to the coast, I was offered quite a decent job with an expanding firm. And somehow just *having* the money in the background seemed to give me a sort of confidence I'd never had before. It represented security, a reserve I could dip into anytime I wanted to. But the occasion never rose. Everything just fell into place and today I am well off financially."

I glared at the briefcase. "You never touched a single bill of that money?"

"Not one blessed bill. This is even the original briefcase."

I sighed. "Oh, perfidious man. You never did have that damn amnesia."

He drew himself up. "Of course, I did."

"Nonsense," I said. "If you woke up penniless in Blue River Falls and did not touch any of the ransom money, then how did you manage to pay for the train tickets, not to mention the food you must have eaten on your way to the West Coast?"

He winced at the hole in his story and decided to tell the truth. "All right. I did not have amnesia. After Dougherty gave me the briefcase and the weird instructions, my curiosity was aroused. I peeked into the briefcase, saw the money, and on impulse decided to steal it. Before I left town, however, I withdrew my savings account from the bank—close to one thousand dollars—and used that for my transportation, food money, and the like. Dougherty told me nothing whatsoever about the kidnaping. If I'd known that the life of his son was involved, I never would have taken the money at all. I simply assumed that Dougherty was indulging in something shady, like transferring cash to avoid income or corporation taxes. I didn't think in terms of ransom money at all."

I was not ready to forgive him. "Then why all this amnesia business? If you knew who you were and wanted to return the money, why the devil didn't you just mail the briefcase to Dougherty and let that be that?"

"Because I really want someone in Regansville—not Miss Henson, but the librarian—to believe I had had amnesia and I wanted you as a backup man, so to speak. When I 'recovered' my memory, it was my plan to send you back there again to find out if she was still single, and if she still cared, and if she might be willing to quietly slip out of town and go with me back to the West Coast."

He sighed. "How do you explain to a woman that you left her six years before just because you wanted to steal two hundred thousand dollars? Her pride would never accept that. But if I claimed it was all a case of amnesia, and you were willing to certify that the amnesia was genuine . . ."

The next morning I drove back to Regansville and returned the briefcase and the \$200,000 to Dougherty.

I then stopped at the Regansville library and took the librarian, a Miss Turley, to one side and sketched out an edited version of Willinger's predicament.

Miss Turley blinked happily. "I just knew it had to be something serious like amnesia. I never did believe for one minute that he just took the money and ran away."

I nodded. "The most genuine and stubborn case of amnesia I've ever come across. Bumps on the head simply aren't sufficient to restore his memory. However, if you will come with me, I have the premonition that seeing someone of whom he was really very fond might just be the medicine that will snap him out of it."

And, of course, it was.